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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a proposed term project for a course in documentary photography that centered on photographically documenting a rural community and measuring its symbolic sociodramas. The paper describes the focus of the project, which was to determine how various community groups interpreted a given set of photographs designed to express a dimension of life in the community. It also explains the coorientation model and multidimensional scaling (MDS) approach chosen to analyze the set of documentary photographs and to compare responses from various citizens' groups. MDS is defined, and the procedure for implementing the proposed project is summarized. (AE)

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# Documentary Photography: Cognitive Dimensionality of Selected Photographs and Community Perceptions in a Coorientation Model

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## Documentary Photography: Approach

During the past three years there has been an effort in our photographic program at establishing and refining an academic and journalistic approach to documentary photography of small communities. Experience obtained during the first two years was distilled this year into a more structured approach both in production and research areas. The design of the course and the research proposal was done jointly. Research objectives impinged upon site selection and photographic approach while choice of town, with resultant photographic constraints, placed particular parameters around the research design.

Town selection was done by the instructor and two teaching assistants who had been participants in the previous years' effort. After lengthy discussion about past successes and constraints plus specific educational objectives of the course, several guidelines were established to aid in the selection process.

The overriding academic consideration was to find a community which would allow students the experience of being involved in the formal as well as the informal aspects of community life. This principle consideration lead to other criteria which were evaluated by previous experience.

Size of community and distance from campus became two important considerations. It was felt that the community needed to be small enough (under 300) to allow maximum coverage during the ten week spring quarter and specifically during the two weeks alloted for on-site photography. To avoid taking the town by photographic blitz, we decided to find a town within an hour's

drive from campus which would allow frequent trips. This became a realistic parameter for it presented many communities which were outside the metropolitan influence yet within easy driving distance. A preliminary survey of towns included twenty possible sites. This was narrowed to three communities which were revisited for final consideration.

It was apparent to all involved that the self contained community which was finally selected (295 population, 35 miles from campus) offered the best possible documentary photography laboratory during the current academic year.

Documentary Photography: Production

Photographic production was divided into several stages. While site selection was under way, several academic goals were achieved. John Collier's book Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Tool was discussed as were twelve major photographic books of historical, social, and photographic importance.

The aim of this literature review was to have the students evaluate and discuss a variety of sources in terms of audience, documentary approach, style, and applicability to the term project. This approach allowed us to prepare and sharpen perspective prior to having the students visit the selected community.

After students had made an initial visit to the town, classroom discussion centered around a refined approach and specific areas of responsibility. Students were divided into teams. Each team was to look at one aspect of the town's cultural life. The topic areas were broad in scope and allowed individuals to make

judgements about particular stories but it also fixed their approach on a general theme so we could insure that the town had been adequately covered. Themes consisted of politics, economics, religion, social life, and education. After assignment of themes students returned to the town for research and interviewing within their areas of responsibility. Proposals were then prepared outlining story ideas and approach. These proposals were reviewed to insure that the topic had been thoroughly researched and that specific photographic ideas were in mind before proceeding. This review process also allowed us to begin script development for the slide show presentation which was the final class project for the quarter.

In addition to photographic goals each student was assigned a task in the production of the slide-tape show and in gathering field data for the research project.

Research Project

During last year's documentary effort, data were collected by survey questionnaires. While this data provided an indication of strong, positive public opinion toward the project, no real knowledge of the impact of specific photographs was gained. This year's proposed research will begin to explore this important area of visual communication.

A community can be thought of as a social unit with certain social and geographic boundaries. Various individuals and subgroups often play multiple roles in interpersonal relationships within the town. Some individuals serve as boundry agents to

the town by their connections to the larger world. Small, rural towns, such as the one to be visited, are often characterized by an oligarchic structure (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1977). Individuals who are socially powerful in one sector of the community tend to be powerful in others. While it might be presumed that leaders and citizens in small town areas would have similar definitions of community problems and agreement on solutions, recent studies described by Tichenor, et. al. (1977) indicate this may not be true.

Community leaders often deal with multiple perspectives, those of the local community and those of the larger society. The more cosmopolitan outlook can often put community leaders at odds with the community on issues involving conflict.

Meisenhelder (1977) in describing the sociological theory of Hugh Duncan argues that:

> Power is the control of the symbolic resources of a community. Societal power is actualized by the control and direction of community dramas. Whoever creates and controls the sociodramas of everyday life controls our lives. For it is in these dramas that acts are named, and it is under these names that we participate in struggle over principles of social order. (p. 270)

The term project of photographically documenting a rural community is then the measuring of symbolic sociodramas thus producing an objective visual account of the community's patterns of behavior and the symbolic structure by which it lives.

We know that community leaders sometimes differ in orientation to issues with the community due to their multiple connections to a larger society. We know that a community's culture involves

standards for perception related to behavior. We know that photography can provide a record of symbolic interaction related to social order. The question at hand is: how will various groups in a community interpret a given set of photographs designed to express an important dimension of life in that community? Will those groups be in agreement in their interpretation? From a theoretical viewpoint, the coorientation strategy seems most applicable to answer these questions.

The coorientation strategy has been well described by Chaffee, McLeod, and Guerrero (1969). However, a brief review of some of the major concepts is appropriate. There are five basic postulates described by McLeod (1971):

> 1. Since communication usually involves an exchange of information between persons, it is desirable to adopt an interpersonal unit of analysis and to reconceptualize variables into interpersonal constructs. The former implies sampling clusters of people in field studies and using interacting groups in laboratory experiments. Persons interacting bear a particular affective and role relationship to each other.
>
> 2. The idea of exchange implies the desirability of studying changes in the cognitive states of persons over time. It should be made clear that such changes do not constitute communication per se, but rather serve as proper index of communication effects where such changes can be systematically related to communication messages or processes. This postulate should not be thought as a simple recommendation for before-after research designs. The requirements of the model probably require measurement over at least four separate points in time.
>
> 3. the definition of communication as a process or exchange requires the conceptualization and measurement of sequences of messages and acts independent from the cognitions of the persons interacting
>
> 4. the exchange of information requires that the interacting persons be capable of simultaneous orientation to an object or set of objects that serve as the focus or topic of communication. Prior assessment of such capability becomes a difficult challenge for the researcher.

> 5. The basic data for coorientation research, then, includes the relationship of the persons interacting, their cognitive states regarding objects of simultaneous orientation over time, and the exchange process that takes place between them. Since the unit is an interpersonal one, it is necessary to analyze combinations of the cognitive states of the interacting persons. These states include their judgments of the cognitive states of other persons. (p. 2)

The general coorientation model is shown in Figure 1. There are five possible measures generated by the model. Congruency is the degree of similarity of a person's own cognitions and his perception of the other person's cognitions. Agreement compares the "own" cognitions of the two individuals. Agreement is used for evaluative cognitions and understanding is used for nonevaluative cognitions (facts or attributes). Accuracy is the extent that one person's estimate of the other person's cognitions matches what the other person really does think.

While early studies have focused on interpersonal communication, the model has been extended to the level of intergroup relationships. Meiller and Broom (1979) addressed the problems of building community consensus, obtaining accurate information about community opinions, and involving citizens in the planning process. Three groups were used in their coorientation analysis: citizens, elected officials, and community leaders. The objects of coorientation were ten general community development problem areas, ie., health care, environment and quality of life, housing.

Applying the coorientational model to groups can lead to a problem of "reification". Respondents may not attribute

appropriate individuals' views to groups defined by the researcher, or respondents may be reluctant to estimate what groups think. McLeod (1971) suggested that the reification of groups be treated as a measured variable rather than an assumed property. For example, subjects can be presented with various scale positions relevant to the object of study and be asked to estimate what proportion of people comprising that group would hold each position. Meiller and Broom (1979) did not experience either problem in their community studies.

The coorientation measurement model seems to be appropriate for analysis of a selected set of documentary photographs and describing and comparing responses from citizens and other groups such as elected officials or other community leaders. However, these measures based on correlational analysis can not describe the underlying dimensions of the obtained responses. For example, agreement or understanding could be high but for completely different reasons. What is needed is a description of the underlying cognitive decisions found in the coorientation object. Fortunately, a methodological approach exists to describe this process.

Multidimensional Scaling (MDS) refers to a class of techniques using proximities among any kind of objects as input (Kruskal & Wish, 1978). A proximity is a number indicating how similar or how different two objects are, or are perceived to be. The chief output is a spacial representation, consisting of a geometric configuration of points like a map. Each point corresponds to one of the objects. This configuration reflects the "hidden structure" in the data. In obtaining proximities data, subjects

are asked to directly judge the "psychological distance" of the stimulus objects. Although "similarity" and dissimilarity" are often used, Kruskal and Wish suggested that alternative words could be: relatedness, dependence, association, complementarity, substitutability, and so on. In order to discover rather than impose the dimensions, the attributes on which the stimuli are to be judged are not specified.

Dimmick (1973) used MDS in obtaining similarities data on ten randomly selected news stories from the AP wire using four groups varying in journalistic experience. subjects were presented with all possible nonredundant pairs of the ten stories and were asked to sort the pairs into two piles. One pile contained those stories felt to be "similar," using whatever definition of similarity he chose, and the other pile contained those stories felt to be "different". Subjects then ranked the pairs in each pile from most similar to most different. Thus, a similarity rank order of all pairs of the stories for each subject was obtained. Subsequently, each subject was asked to rate each story on five basic news selection criteria: conflict, proximity, timeliness, known principal, and significance. The ratings on the five selection criteria can be displayed as vectors imposed on the configuration of points generated by the MDS methodology. The proximity of the vectors to the points indicates if those attributes are correlated with underlying cognitive decisional processes used in the sorting of the stimulus objects, in this case news stories.

A similar use of MDS in the design of an advantageous product advertising theme was described by Lautman, Percy, and Kordish (1978).

Gillham and Woelfel (1977) proposed MDS as an important tool in theory of measurement for communication and cognitive processes, particularly in describing the aggregate cognitive processes of a group, organization, or society.

In sum, MDS is seen as an appropriate methodology for describing perceived dimensions in photographs as a prior step in coorientational analysis of community group perceptions.

Procedure

For the purposes of this study, it was decided to provide a set of stimulus photographs which were designed, a priori, to represent one salient aspect of the community's culture. This will allow greater opportunity to apply the coorientational model. The photographs used will involve a religious theme.

It became apparent from the earliest site visits that much of the town's activity focused on the church. All but five of the grade school children of the town attend the church school. An early interview revealed a principle attitude, "We don't have a town paper but we do have the church bulletin". The local priest stated that the entire town turns out for funerals. Thus, indicating strong familial ties as well as religious unanimity. The church also serves as the social focus of the community primarily because of access to available meeting space. It seemed then that research focus on perceived religiosity of the community would prove particularly rewarding.

Six photographs will be combined into all possible nonredundant pairs [n(n-1)/2=15]. These photographs will be shown to three groups: religious officials (n=4), elected officials (n=5), and a random sample of citizens (n to be determined). The citizen sample will be drawn from a random sample of households. Responses will be collected by personal interview using students in the documentary class as interviewers.

A similarity rank ordering will be obtained for each subject without imposing verbal labels of picture attributes, in the same fashion as Dimmick (1973). Following the initial sort, subjects will be asked to make scaled responses to attribute labels supplied by the experimentors for each of the six photographs. These labels will be comprised of attributes the experimentors feel will explain dimensions in the photographs. These attribute labels can not be stipulated until the stimulus photographs are selected. However, possible attributes of interest include: interaction, religiosity, helping, and emotion.

Subjects will then be asked to estimate how the other groups would respond to the six photoographs (ie. the religious officials will be asked how the elected officials and other citizens would respond). The estimation of other group's responses will allow analysis from a coorientation framework.

The cognitive dimensionality of the photographs will be determin using MDS. Dimmick (1973) found that experienced journalists perceive more dimensionality in news stories than did journalistically naive subjects. Thus, the following hypothesis is suggested:

> H1: In viewing photographs associated with religiosity, religious officials will perceive more dimensionality than elected officials or other citizens.

One of the present researchers, studying the relationship between clergy and laity on social issues in the Presbyterian church, found that two factors, religious involvement and secular (political, economic) involvement were in a dynamic relationship. The more secular a parishioner involvement in community life, the less prone they were to accepting the clergy's pronouncements on social issues. The more involved parishioners were in the life and teaching of the church, the more prone they were to accept official church positions on social issues.

Studies cited earlier indicate that community leaders, because of their multiple roles will be more cosmopolitan and thus hold opinions which may well be at odds with more traditional community ideas. While neither study examined directly the notion of perceived religiosity, it can be hypothesized that on this single dimension --religiosity--a dynamic relationship between religious involvement and secular involvement can be mapped.

From a coorientational viewpoint we expect:

H2: The greater the involvement of citizens in the activities of the church, the higher the agreement between citizens and religious officials on their perceptions of selected photographs.

H3: The greater the involvement of citizens in the activities of the church, the more congruent will be each group (religious officials and citizens) in their perception of the other group's perception of selected photographs.

H4: The greater the involvement of citizens in the activities of the church, the greater will be the accuracy of perceptions of selected photographs between citizens and religious officials.

In relating the MDS analysis to the coorientational model we expect:

> H5: The higher the involvement of citizens in the activities of the church, the greater the commonality with religious officials on perceived cognitive dimensions of selected photographs.

Since the community has a small, homogenous, population under 300 population, we expect no significant differences on the variables measured between the elected officials and the citizens, as these groups would not be expected to differ on religiosity. However, the possible relationships will be examined for significance.

Photographers rarely make any attempt, either qualitative or quantitative, to assess the communication effects of pictures they have made. Documentary photography is extracting from its subject the essence of interpersonal relationships and resulting social order. The success of any documentary effort should, in part, be analyzed from the perspectives of those photographed. The proposed study provides a methodological base for such an analysis.

Multi-Media Presentation

An edited version of the final multi-media show produced by the documentary photography class for presentation at the town will be shown at the AEJ conference. This will be followed by discussion of data obtained from the research design.

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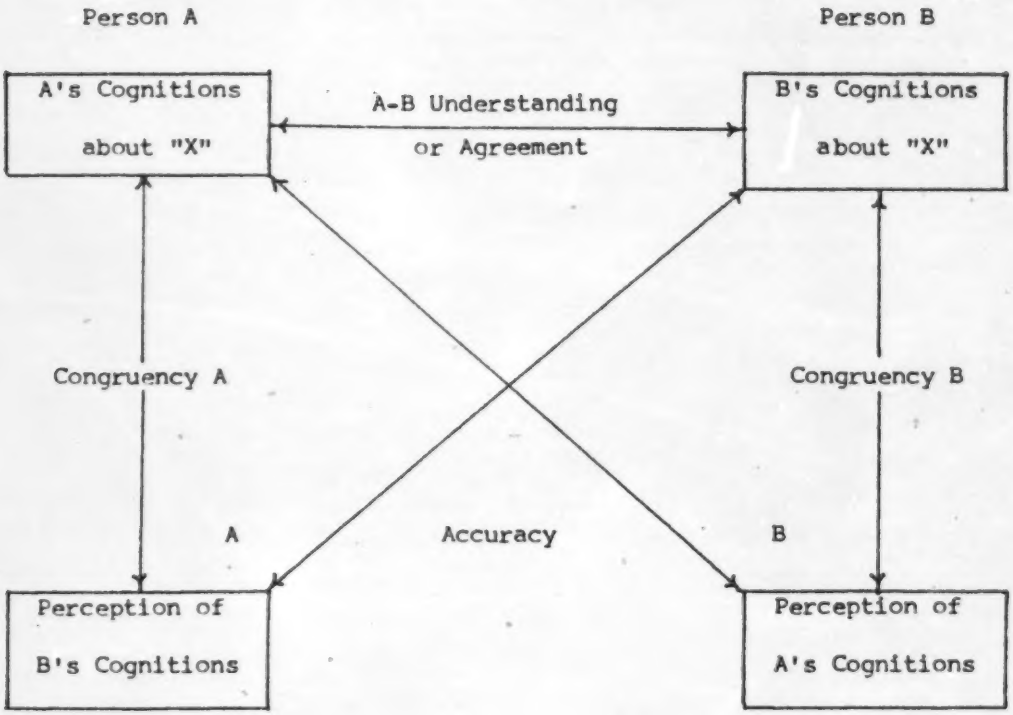
FIGURE 1
Coorientational Measurement Model*




*Chaffee, S. H., Mcleod, J. M., & Guerrero, J. L. Origins and implications of the coorientational approach in communication research. Unpublished manuscript, University of Wisconsin, 1969.